

Rise and Shine: A.M. Workouts

It's 5:30 a.m. and your alarm clock explodes with either a violent beep or a classic 80s rock song. Automatically, you roll out of bed with morning breath and bed hair. You're not a garbage man, not a bus driver and not a newspaper delivery person. You're a swimmer, and rising early is just as much a part of you as that ever-present chlorine odor. Let's face it, as a group we are the earliest risers in sports. We're the bird that gets the worm. We are the epitome of the old army slogan "We do more before 9:00 a.m. than most people do all day." Let's take a look at the benefits and drawbacks of morning workouts.

Most people think that the idea of morning swim practices and two-a-day workouts began with one of the coaching greats like Doc Counsilman or George Haines. However, there may be evidence that could link morning workouts to the ancient Athenians or maybe the Carthagian military commander, Hannibal Barcus, who climbed over the Alps to attack Rome. It's rumored that Hannibal originally started the morning workouts to train his fleet of elephants.

Seriously, nobody knows for certain when morning workouts began, but it is clear that they define our sport. How many basketball players do you know who hit the courts before sunrise? In fact, it would be difficult to find any group of people in Britain who follow this tradition of early rising as closely as swimmers. Is this true for the rest of the world? Believe it or not, across the world every morning, there are millions who rise early to practice although they aren't swimming lengths.

Today you can travel to Singapore, Thailand or China and find millions of people who rise at 5 a.m. to practice the ancient forms Tai Chi, Qi Gong or Yoga, activities that are believed to strengthen the mind and the body. As swimmers, we also rise early to strengthen our bodies and minds, using swimming as our form of meditation. We've established a culture of rising early and practicing harmonic activities without even realising it.

As a teenager, I always questioned the necessity of waking up early to train, but now I understand that morning workouts have many benefits. It's great to start one's day in a calm and quiet environment, and after a morning workout, one feels an incredible sense of accomplishment having done so much so early in the day.

With all of this said, I realise that there's a strong rebuttal to the "waking up is great" argument. There's a portion of our swimming community that feels that morning practice is the most dreaded aspect of our sport. They hate waking up early. We all know the "walking dead" when we see them. They're always last in the water and the first to find a reason to go back to bed. I sympathise with them and admit that I was once one of them.

Another strong counter is the "morning workout paradox," that states that for every minute of sleep you take away from your body, your body will find a way to retrieve it, oftentimes when you need it the most. I can't count the times I have dozed off while in class or at work.

The early bird may get the worm, but hopefully not at the expense of a good night's sleep.

The ritual of morning workouts is just one the many customs that help to define ourselves as swimmers. Whether we like morning workouts or not, they are a part of our sport and thus a part of our lives. Let's make the most of them.